

Ex-police chaplain on trial in Argentina

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LA PLATA, Argentina --

A former police chaplain went on trial Thursday, the first Roman Catholic cleric to be prosecuted on charges of complicity in deaths and disappearances during Argentina's 1976-83 military dictatorship.

Christian Von Wernich, 69, wore a bulletproof vest and a priest's collar as he appeared behind a reinforced glass shield in a federal courthouse in the provincial capital La Plata.

Shouts of "assassin!" from 200 protesters outside could be heard in the chamber as a clerk read charges accusing Von Wernich of collaborating with state security agents and covering up crimes in seven deaths, 31 cases of torture and 42 cases of illegal imprisonment.

Von Wernich, who was arrested in 2003, declined to make an opening statement on the advice of his lawyer, who vehemently rejected the charges and promised a vigorous defense.

Nearly 13,000 people are officially listed as killed or missing in the dictatorship's crackdown on dissent, known as the dirty war. Human rights groups say the toll is closer to 30,000.

The prosecution said it would call witnesses to testify that Von Wernich collaborated with police torturers and provided security agents with information he obtained from prisoners while giving "spiritual assistance" at secret detention centers.

Prosecutor Sergio Franco alleged that Von Wernich had "direct contact" with detainees and inflicted psychological "torments" on victims being held in illegal confinement and subject to physical torture by police.

Scores of former state security agents and their civilian allies have been called to testify in investigations after the Supreme Court in 2005 annulled a pair of 1980s amnesty laws sheltering agents of the dictatorship from prosecution.

Last year, former police investigator Miguel Etchecolatz was convicted of genocide and sentenced to life imprisonment. But that trial was marred by the disappearance of the chief prosecution witness, torture survivor Jorge Julio Lopez, who remains missing.

The head of the three-judge panel, Carlos Rozanski, said the court was taking unprecedented steps to protect prosecution witnesses in Von Wernich's trial.